

Sex work and speech: the public perception of terms describing sex industry participants

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Simple [language] change is far more than ‘politically correct’ – it can reshape attitudes. Such a reshaping is critical if we are to arrive at policies and practices that are realistic, humane and genuinely helpful to society and to the people concerned (Urban Justice Center)

Background

- Sex work and linguistics
 - Media representations (Hintikka and Nevala 2017)
 - Corpus work (McEnery and Baker 2016)
- Other research
 - Empathy and victim blaming (Sprankle et al. 2018)
- Linguistic representation of marginalized groups changes to mitigate derogatory terms
 - “Illegals” or “aliens” → “non-citizens”
- Toolkits and style guides

Methodology

- Anonymous Qualtrics survey distributed to undergraduate college students
- Demographic questions - including political alignment
- Focusing on four terms: sex worker, escort, hooker, prostitute
 - Familiarity, frequency, judgment, stigma level
- 18 responses received as of 11/10/21

Terminology

"Sex worker"

popularity increased
from **2008** onwards
(Google ngrams),
supported by activists
as a neutral term for
industry participants

"Escort"

dated around **1941**
onwards (OED 2006),
describing the act of
escorting
or accompanying
someone - "polite"
euphemism

"Hooker"

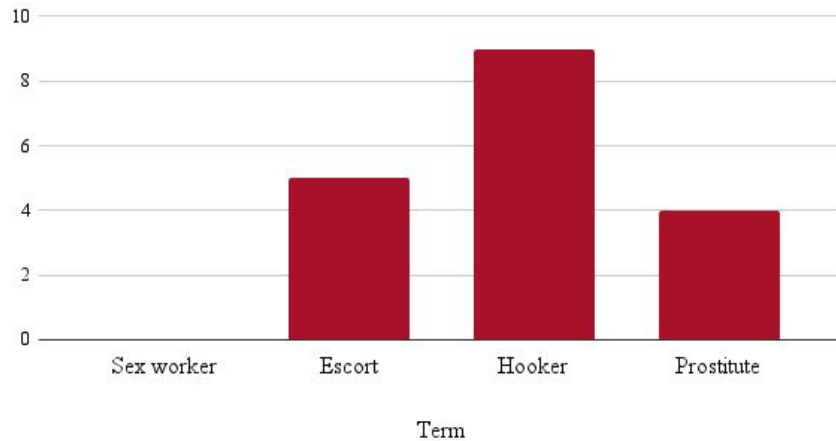
popularized in the **1820s**,
reference to New York
neighborhood - Corlear's
Hook (History Collection),
derogatory

"Prostitute"

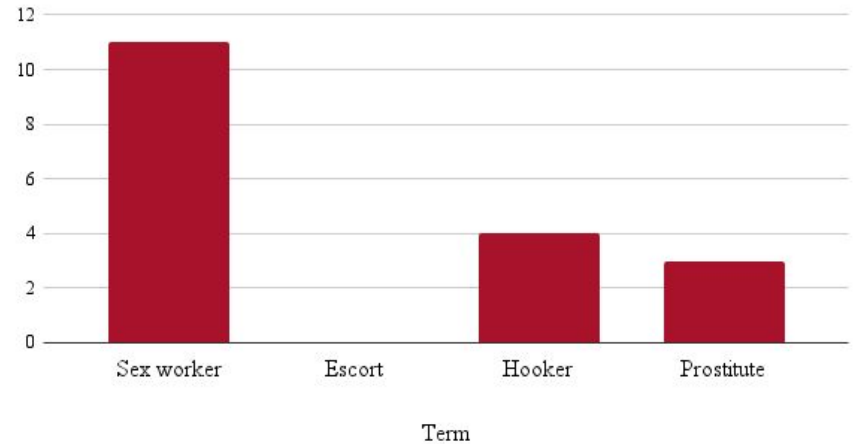
1610s, "to offer
indiscriminate sexual
intercourse (for money)"
(Etymonline), derogatory

Results – Terms in Different Contexts

Which word do you see used the most often in television?



Which word do you see used the most often on social media?



Results – Perceived Sentiments

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Sex worker	0	10	7
Escort	1	16	0
Hooker	17	0	0
Prostitute	17	0	0

Results – Political Ideology

- Over 90 percent of participants described their political ideologies as being left-wing
- When asked what sort of ideology they associated with each term, a majority of participants reported the following:
 - Hooker, prostitute = right-wing coded
 - Sex worker, escort = left-wing or moderate coded

Results – Personal Perspectives & Preferences

If someone uses x word to describe someone [...] describe the ideas and judgements that the speaker might hold:

- ◉ Sex worker: “neutral”, “less judgment”, “transactional”, “leftist”
- ◉ Escort: “high paying clients”, “more classy”, “not as much of a negative sexual meaning”, “more neutral [than hooker and prostitute]”
- ◉ Hooker: “dirty”, “immoral”, “promiscuous”, “trashy”
- ◉ Prostitute: “more neutral [than hooker]”, “[speaker] doesn't know a more politically correct word”, “judgmental”, “impersonal”

“Which word would you use in describing a sex industry participant?” 17/18 participants responded with “sex worker”

Looking ahead

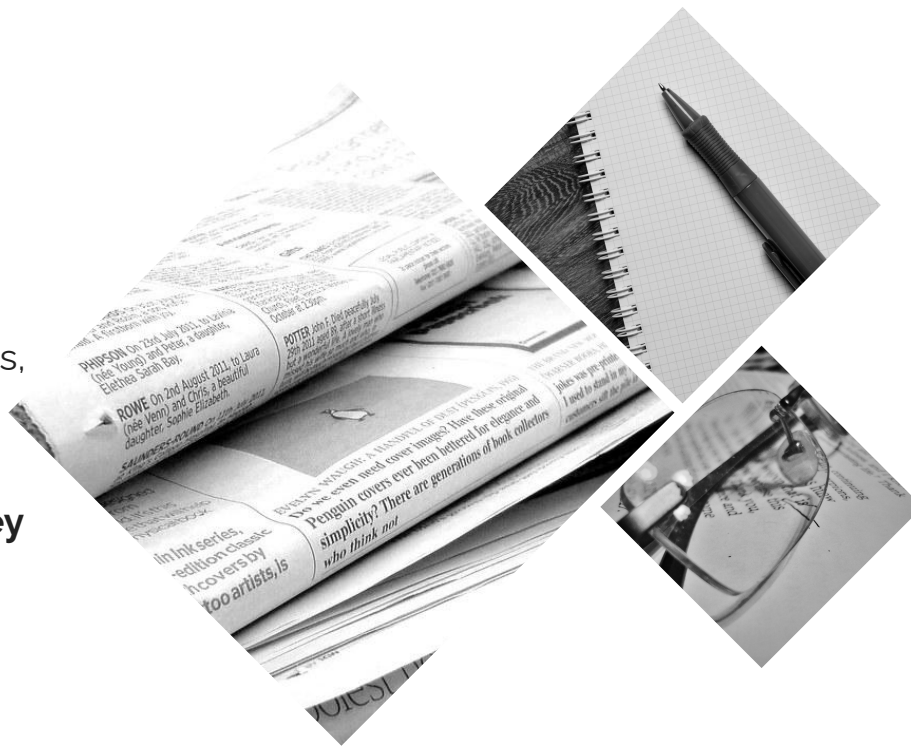
Corpus work and sentiment analysis

The racialization of sex worker-directed language

Style guide - developed via focus group in collaboration with linguists and sex workers, amplifying the latter

Move towards neutrality and empathy

Give people a seat at the table where they are being spoken about



Thanks!

ANY QUESTIONS?



Please feel free to contact me at kinnaird.13@osu.edu to be connected with further resources.